

Longmen Hao Old Street Historical and Cultural Scenic Area: One of the Twelve Scenic Spots of Ba-Yu A Study on the Path to Balancing Cultural Heritage Preservation and Commercial Development

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Abstract

Study on the Balancing Path between Cultural Heritage and Commercial Development in the Longmenhao Old Street Historical and Cultural Scenic Area of Bayu Twelve Scenes. Against the backdrop of rapid tourism development in the new era, historical and cultural scenic areas face deep-seated contradictions between cultural heritage preservation and commercial development. Taking Chongqing's Longmenhao Old Street as a case study, this research employs questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and literature analysis to systematically investigate the marginalization of cultural value in the process of commercialization. The findings reveal that 73% of tourists visit for cultural value, yet over half believe that cultural promotion falls short of expectations, indicating a prevalent "commerce over culture" imbalance. This contradiction stems from three dimensions: short-term interest orientation in decision-making logic, demand misjudgment at the execution level, and standardized supply in supply-demand matching. The study further uncovers multiple conflicts between commercialization and cultural heritage in terms of goal logic, value orientation, and spatial resource allocation. Based on these findings, this paper proposes balancing paths including optimizing cultural presentation methods, establishing multi-stakeholder collaborative governance mechanisms, and implementing scientific intervention experiments, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical guidance for achieving dynamic balance between preservation and development in historical and cultural scenic areas.

Keywords

cultural heritage, commercial development, balancing path, Longmenhao old street, cognitive-experience imbalance

1. Introduction

Located in the middle section of Nanbin Road in Nan'an District, Chongqing, Longmenhao Old Street is the largest and best-preserved historical and cultural district in the city center. The area blends the cultures of the city's founding, the War of Resistance, the Ba-Yu region, and religion. It features 18 historic cultural heritage buildings, as well as numerous historical sites such as the former residence of the U.S. Embassy's

military attaché and the former Xinhua Trust and Savings Bank. It includes two municipal-level protected cultural heritage buildings and 15 outstanding historic buildings, and is the site of “Longmenhao Moon”—one of the Twelve Scenic Spots of Ancient Ba-Yu. It covers an area of approximately 380 mu, with a total construction area of about 97,300 square meters. The Old Street takes its name from “Longmen Hao,” a name coined by Su Shi and his two sons in the first year of the Jiayou era of the Northern Song Dynasty, inspired by the stone bridge landscape on the Yangtze River; during the Southern Song Dynasty, the “Longmen Hao Yue” (Vast Moon over Longmen) landscape took shape. In 1891, it became the first inland treaty port, and during the War of Resistance, it housed diplomatic missions from over 30 countries, including Italy and the United States.

In the current era, with the booming development of the tourism industry, historical and cultural scenic areas—which have long served as vital repositories of urban memory and regional culture—face an increasingly prominent tension between their cultural value and commercial development. While commercial development brings significant economic benefits to these areas, promoting the improvement of infrastructure and local economic growth, an excessive pursuit of short-term economic returns can lead to frequent issues such as cultural homogenization and the dilution of historical ambiance. As scholars such as Zhang Fanghong [1] have pointed out in their literature, tourism development may pose challenges to cultural heritage, and the current situation confirms the conclusions drawn in these studies.

In the rapid commercialization of Chongqing’s Longmenhao Old Street, there exists a phenomenon of “prioritizing commerce over culture.” While many tourists visit the scenic area drawn by its cultural promotions, the intensity and effectiveness of these promotions fall far short of visitors’ expectations. Visitors experience primarily the commercial aspects of the site, putting its cultural foundations at risk of marginalization and making cultural preservation increasingly difficult.

2. Exploring Factors Contributing to the Imbalance Between Cultural Heritage Preservation and Commercial Development in the Longmenhao Cultural Scenic Area

2.1 At the Decision-Making Logic Level: The Superstructure Tends Toward Short-Term Profit Orientation

According to the analysis in the references cited in this study, Lei Ming and Li Li [2] further pointed out that mass media may face challenges of cultural value reshaping under the commercialization context. Local governments and enterprises often exhibit a “short-term profit orientation” in their decision-making processes. This tendency stems from the pressure of performance evaluations and the profit-seeking nature of the market, and thus becomes the root cause of imbalanced resource allocation. To explain the formation of this tendency in concrete terms: economic benefits, due to their quantifiability and immediacy, are more easily prioritized in decision-making evaluations. For example, they are rapidly reflected through quantifiable indicators such as GDP growth, tax revenue, or project return on investment; In contrast, the benefits of cultural heritage require long-term investment and are difficult to measure with concrete figures. They encompass many aspects, such as the preservation of cultural heritage, the transmission of traditional crafts, and the cultivation of social values. Since these benefits are often implicit, cumulative, and social in nature, they are at a disadvantage in terms of decision-making weight. Furthermore, decision-makers may lack a long-term understanding of cultural value, or they may be constrained by term limits and public pressure, which further exacerbates this imbalance. This tendency results in financial, human, and policy resources flowing predominantly toward sectors that yield rapid economic returns—such as infrastructure development and commercial projects—thereby neglecting the sustained investment required for cultural preservation and transmission. A concrete example is seen in budget allocation, where cultural projects are frequently cut, postponed, or even marginalized from the mainstream policy agenda due to their long investment cycles and lack of immediate returns. Consequently, this imbalance in resource allocation not only undermines the sustainable development of cultural endeavors but may also accelerate the loss of cultural heritage and weaken social and cultural identity, thereby further constraining the region’s long-term comprehensive development. From a broader perspective, this imbalance also erodes society’s cultural soft power, diminishes the region’s uniqueness and appeal in the context of global competition, and may even trigger intergenerational equity issues, posing a risk of homogenization in the future cultural ecosystem.

2.2 Implementation Level: Mismatch Between Scenic Area Development and Visitor Needs

Another significant factor is scenic areas' "misjudgment" of visitor needs, which often manifests in tourism development plans and thus has far-reaching consequences. Li Ning and Wang Ge [3] also emphasized the importance of balancing media commercialization with social responsibility. However, in the practice of scenic area management, regulatory gaps and short-sighted evaluation systems often lead to cultural preservation being overshadowed by commercial development. Data from the questionnaire designed in the preliminary phase of this study indicates that a large number of visitors are primarily motivated by cultural exploration and immersive experiences; they hope to learn about local history, traditions, and arts through travel. However, scenic area managers may, based on incomplete market research or subjective assumptions, mistakenly believe that commercial facilities and entertainment projects are the key drivers of visitor attraction. Consequently, they allocate substantial resources to food and beverage services, souvenir shops, and "Instagrammable" photo spots, leading to the neglect of in-depth development and innovation in cultural experience projects during the design phase. This misjudgment often stems from scenic area managers' excessive pursuit of short-term economic returns or a lack of systematic visitor behavior analysis and scientific evaluation mechanisms, causing investment decisions to deviate significantly from actual needs. For example, while some scenic areas blindly expand shopping districts and photo spots, they fail to allocate sufficient funds to improve historical interpretation systems, design interactive displays of traditional crafts, or plan immersive cultural activities. As a result, not only do they fail to enhance visitor satisfaction and repeat visit rates, but they also cause resource waste and damage to their brand image. Furthermore, in the long term, such misjudgments may weaken the cultural competitiveness of the attractions, causing them to lose their unique appeal in an increasingly homogenized tourism market, and even trigger negative visitor feedback and a decline in reputation. Therefore, correcting these misjudgments requires attractions to adopt a data-driven approach, balancing commercial and cultural investments to truly meet the core needs of visitors.

2.3 Supply-Demand Alignment: Diversifying Visitor Needs

Visitor demands are increasingly diverse, a trend evident not only in travel objectives but also in the depth of experiences and modes of participation. Visitors of different age groups exhibit distinct preferences: younger demographics may lean toward adventurous exploration and interactive experiences, such as engaging with novel activities or creating social media posts; whereas older visitors prefer tranquil, leisurely cultural immersion, such as visiting museums or enjoying wellness-focused journeys. Furthermore, differences in tourist interests have led to further segmentation. Some tourists seek in-depth cultural experiences, craving immersion in local life—such as participating in traditional folk festivals, learning handicrafts, or delving into the stories behind historical sites. Others, however, travel solely for leisure and entertainment, preferring a relaxed and comfortable sightseeing environment where they can stroll through scenic areas, enjoy natural landscapes, or simply take photos for social media. Still others prioritize wellness, family bonding, or social sharing. These diverse needs collectively form a complex landscape of the tourism market.

However, under the impact of commercialization, many scenic areas have gradually shifted toward providing standardized commercial offerings, introducing chain restaurants, fast-food outlets, and generic souvenirs. While this model can drive development, it fails to fully develop differentiated cultural offerings, leading to a severe "hollowing out" of cultural experiences. Hong Shouyi [4] examined the cultural ecology of adolescents in the context of media commercialization, highlighting the potential erosion of cultural values by commercialization—a warning that equally applies to cultural dissemination in tourist attractions. This trend toward standardization stems largely from scenic area management's pursuit of short-term economic gains; they tend to replicate successful business models while neglecting the uniqueness of local cultural resources. To attract mass tourists, scenic areas may introduce large numbers of well-known brand stores, squeezing out the survival space of local specialty shops and traditional workshops, thereby exacerbating the homogenization of the commercial atmosphere. They also create and design signage based on trendy, culturally shallow slogans like "I miss you so much in XX," which further panders to the demands of the commercialization wave, leading to a loss of cultural substance and making cultural projects even more "hollow."

This “hollowing out” manifests in cultural projects that often remain superficial in form—such as folk performances that have become overly commercialized and lost their authenticity, or historical narrations that are shallow and lack depth. These fail to satisfy the intellectual and emotional needs of visitors eager to explore, while simultaneously causing the scenic area to lose its unique cultural charm and regional character. More specifically, some cultural experiences have been reduced to mere sightseeing activities, where visitors can only passively watch performances or read signage, with little opportunity for interactive participation; meanwhile, craft demonstrations may serve merely as sales gimmicks, lacking in-depth explanations regarding the transmission of traditional skills. Such superficial experiences not only disappoint visitors but may also lead to the simplification or misinterpretation of cultural symbols.

In the long term, this imbalance between supply and demand will weaken the core appeal of the destination. Declining visitor satisfaction may trigger a decline in reputation, which in turn will affect the stability of tourism revenue. Ultimately, this will jeopardize the destination’s sustainable development and may even lead to the dilution or loss of cultural heritage. If scenic areas continue to ignore diverse needs, they may be marginalized in the increasingly fierce tourism competition, while the cultural identity of local communities will gradually weaken, putting traditional crafts and historical memory at risk of being severed. This not only undermines the long-term vitality of the tourism industry but also poses a serious challenge to cultural heritage preservation.

3. Manifestations and Relationships Between Cultural Distortion and Commercialization in Cultural Scenic Areas

3.1 The Growing Discrepancy Between Perception and Experience: Commercial Interference in Visitors’ On-Site Experiences

In contemporary tourism, the imbalance between perception and experience is becoming increasingly pronounced. Visitors choose to visit cultural attractions primarily based on their recognition of the sites’ profound cultural value and an inner longing to experience them, hoping to gain spiritual fulfillment and cultural enrichment through on-site exploration. Otherwise, given today’s fast-paced lifestyle, tourists would likely opt for areas more conducive to shopping and dining. However, during the actual visit, due to excessive commercialization and an overwhelming commercial atmosphere, many tourists fail to obtain the cultural experience they anticipated, thereby creating the paradox of “cultural attraction, commercial dominance.” Specifically, before their trip, visitors gradually build up high expectations and idealized visions of a destination’s cultural significance through various channels—such as official promotional materials, history books, documentaries, and recommendations from social media influencers—viewing it as a pure, authentic, and spiritually inspiring cultural sanctuary. This cognitive process is often accompanied by a romanticized reconstruction of historical scenes and an emotional projection onto cultural symbols, causing tourists to envision a travel landscape rich in meaning and aesthetic significance even before they arrive.

However, upon arrival, visitors discover that the scenic area is filled with homogenized commercial shops, noisy sales promotions, and overly packaged consumer attractions—everywhere they look, they see cookie-cutter souvenir stalls, incessant hawking, and superficial themed entertainment performances. Commercial logic permeates every corner of the scenic area—from the commercialized signage at the entrance, the “I miss you in xxx” slogans, and the so-called “interactive experiences” involving QR code payments, to the “craft exhibition halls” that use culture as a pretext but are essentially shopping venues—all of which demonstrate the dominant presence of commerce within cultural spaces. Consequently, cultural exhibitions—which should occupy a central position—along with in-depth historical explanations, authentic heritage sites, and immersive experiences, have instead been marginalized or reduced to mere formalities due to commercialization. They serve only as accompaniments or decorative backdrops for commercial activities, lacking systematic and in-depth interpretation. Cultural content is often fragmented into superficial information tags or reduced to photo-op backdrops, failing to evoke deep reflection or emotional resonance among visitors.

This significant gap between perception and experience not only leads to psychological disappointment and a sense of alienation among visitors but also prevents them from quietly engaging with deeper cultural meanings and emotional connections—even while physically present in cultural sites—due to commercial

distractions. In some cases, visitors remain unaware of the actual cultural value of the destination, ultimately facing the dilemma of “being there but feeling nothing.” Their visit feels like a superficial sightseeing trip rather than a meaningful cultural journey. Visitors’ behavior within the attractions is consequently affected; they spend more time shuttling between shops, comparing prices, or avoiding sales pitches, rather than pausing to observe, listen to explanations, or participate in experiences. The memories that remain after the trip are often of crowded commercial streets and generic souvenirs, rather than cultural inspiration and spiritual fulfillment.

In the long run, this persistent imbalance between perception and experience may gradually erode the appeal and reputation of cultural attractions. Negative reviews from visitors and expressions of disappointment on social media can influence the decisions of potential visitors, reducing their willingness to return and their likelihood of recommending the destination. More seriously, excessive commercialization may erode the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage, causing it to gradually lose its historical context and original form in the process of catering to consumer demands, and gradually transform into a consumption symbol stripped of its intrinsic meaning. This not only undermines the cultural heritage’s intrinsic value of transmission and educational function but may also lead to the superficialization and homogenization of cultural identity. Consequently, it poses a potential threat to the sustainable development of regional tourism, resulting in the depletion of cultural resources due to overconsumption and fluctuations in the tourism economy caused by the devaluation of the visitor experience. Ultimately, this creates a lose-lose situation for both cultural heritage preservation and tourism development.

3.2 The Imbalance Between Commercialization and Cultural Heritage Is Becoming Increasingly Apparent

The imbalance between commercialization and cultural heritage is not caused by a single factor, but rather is the result of the combined effects of multiple contradictions, including conflicting objectives, the clash between prioritizing efficiency and upholding values, and the alienation of value orientations. These intertwined contradictions create a structural dilemma, placing cultural heritage under severe challenges in the face of the commercialization wave.

First, at the level of objectives, commercial development tends to pursue short-term economic benefits and visitor volume, placing greater emphasis on return on investment and market share, and seeking profits through rapid development of tourist attractions or the launch of derivative products; cultural preservation, on the other hand, focuses on the long-term accumulation of value and the protection of intrinsic meaning, emphasizing historical continuity, the preservation of spiritual essence, and the cultivation of community identity—similar to the systematic documentation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. There is an inherent tension between these two approaches, which often manifests in practical operations as conflicts over resource allocation and disputes regarding decision-making priorities. For instance, in terms of funding, commercial projects may receive priority support, while cultural preservation projects are often shelved due to their long return cycles.

Second, an efficiency-first management mindset tends to favor standardized, quick-return business models—such as using chain operations and digitalization to boost service efficiency and cater to mass consumer demand. Cultural preservation, however, requires patience, meticulous attention, and a non-utilitarian environment; it relies on the slow, painstaking craftsmanship of traditional arts, the intergenerational transmission of local knowledge, and the creation of immersive experiences—such as the master-apprentice system in handicrafts or deep engagement in community festivals. In practice, the latter is often squeezed out by the former, leading to cultural practices becoming superficial or marginalized. A classic example is the reduction of traditional art performances to fast-food-style entertainment, causing them to lose their original cultural depth.

Furthermore, the alienation of values is reflected in the instrumentalization of culture, reducing it to a symbolic label for attracting consumers. For instance, folk festivals are simplified into tourism marketing events, which strips culture of its autonomy and educational function; In terms of spatial resource allocation, commercial entities such as retail stores and entertainment facilities have continuously encroached upon cultural spaces originally designated for exhibitions, performances, and community activities. This has led to a steady contraction of venues for cultural expression, thereby weakening the accessibility and diversity of

public cultural services. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the urbanization process, where historic districts are transformed into commercial complexes, and local cultural elements are reduced to mere decorative accents, making it difficult for them to fulfill their social and educational significance.

Finally, institutional and evaluation systems often prioritize economic indicators—such as revenue, visitor numbers, and tax contributions—while qualitative dimensions like cultural dissemination effectiveness, visitor satisfaction, and heritage conservation status are frequently overlooked. This evaluative bias further reinforces commercialization tendencies, causing policy support and funding to skew toward commercial projects, while cultural projects face sustainability challenges. For instance, government performance evaluations may prioritize economic growth as the primary criterion, resulting in cultural preservation efforts being relegated to a disadvantaged position in resource allocation. Multiple contradictions thus intertwine and coexist, proving difficult to reconcile, and creating a long-term structural dilemma that hinders the positive interaction between cultural heritage transmission and commercialization.

4. Strategies for Balanced Development and Management of the Longmenhao Old Street Historical and Cultural Scenic Area

4.1 Optimizing the Presentation of Culture in the Scenic Area:

It is recommended that the scenic area management establish in-depth cooperative relationships with universities to jointly develop multilingual, interactive cultural guidance systems. This collaboration could encompass multiple academic disciplines at universities, including computer science, tourism management, foreign languages and literature, and digital media arts, utilizing interdisciplinary teams to ensure synergistic optimization in technical development, cultural content planning, and user experience design. The system should fully support multiple languages, including Chinese, English, Japanese, and Korean, and deeply integrate the latest interactive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). Visitors can activate AR overlay interfaces by scanning QR codes placed throughout the scenic area or using rented dedicated devices, virtually recreating historical scenes or participating in VR simulations. This allows them to access real-time, vivid cultural commentary, historical narratives, and personalized interactive content. This initiative aims to fundamentally transform the single-mode approach that relies solely on static text signage, enhancing the appeal and engagement of cultural dissemination to better meet the needs of young visitors seeking novel experiences and international tourists seeking in-depth cultural exploration. At the same time, the system can incorporate a smart feedback module to continuously iterate and update content based on visitor ratings and suggestions, ensuring the timeliness and appeal of cultural presentations. To integrate with mainstream social media platforms, strategies such as interactive check-in points and reward points for sharing should be designed to encourage visitors to share their travel experiences, creating a synergy between online and offline activities and further enhancing cultural influence. To ensure the project's successful implementation, a phased implementation plan is recommended: first, select core attractions for pilot testing to collect data for optimizing system performance; then gradually expand to the entire scenic area; and explore collaborations with local cultural institutions to enrich content sources. In the long term, this system will not only enhance visitor immersion but also serve as a model for smart tourism innovation, driving the scenic area's brand upgrade and sustainable development.

4.2 Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Governance and Scientific Intervention Mechanisms

It is recommended that local governments take the lead in establishing a scenic area development council comprising representatives from scenic area management, local businesses, cultural institutions, community representatives, and academic experts. Permanent bodies such as a presidium and secretariat should be established, with membership ensured through a combination of nomination and election to guarantee representativeness. The council must establish a closed-loop “monitoring-intervention-evaluation” mechanism, holding quarterly meetings to assess the degree of commercialization and the status of cultural preservation. It should develop a multidimensional indicator system covering visitor satisfaction, the integrity of cultural resources, and community economic benefits, and dynamically optimize the evaluation model by drawing on domestic and international experiences.

At the decision-making level, the council shall implement a democratic voting system for major development projects, prioritizing cultural preservation needs and enhancing the credibility of decisions through public notices, hearings, and public consultations. Concurrently, a special fund should be established to prioritize support for cultural projects such as the restoration of historic buildings and the transmission of traditional crafts, accompanied by a rigorous system for fund approval and auditing. For areas with core conflicts, differentiated intervention pilot schemes should be designed—such as embedding intangible cultural heritage workshops within historic districts or establishing cultural and creative markets—using policy tools to regulate the density of commercial activities, and setting up experimental and control groups for comparative research.

Implement a scientific monitoring and evaluation system using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (surveys, focus group interviews, and spatial behavior analysis). Track data on cultural integrity, the evolution of commercial structures, and community engagement over a period of 5 to 10 years. Integrate this with public sentiment analysis and environmental carrying capacity indicators to reveal the patterns of interaction between commercialization and cultural value. Establish a transparent information disclosure mechanism to regularly publish evaluation results and project progress through official channels. Organize cultural preservation training and cross-site exchanges to enhance the professional capabilities of governance entities, ultimately forming a sustainable governance framework characterized by “multi-stakeholder co-governance, dynamic intervention, and scientific evaluation.”

5. Conclusion

Taking the Chongqing Longmenhao Old Street Historical and Cultural Scenic Area as the subject of this study, this paper systematically reveals the core contradiction of “prioritizing commerce over culture” in its commercialization process. This is specifically manifested in issues such as a disconnect between cultural promotion and visitor experience, insufficient cultural signage, the marginalization of cultural foundations, the overshadowing of traditional features by modern commerce, the obstruction of living cultural heritage transmission, and low community participation. After analyzing the root causes from three dimensions—decision-making logic, implementation mechanisms, and supply-demand alignment—this paper proposes a three-dimensional balanced strategy: First, optimize cultural presentation through digital restoration, interactive guided tours, and cultural workshops; second, establish a multi-stakeholder governance model involving government, enterprises, communities, and experts, and develop guidelines for conservation and development alongside a mechanism for sharing benefits; third, conduct intervention experiments such as limiting commercial expansion to protect cultural heritage, while monitoring the dynamic relationship between cultural vitality and economic benefits.

The study strictly aligns with national cultural and tourism development strategies, deeply integrating the policy framework with the concepts of “cultural confidence,” “cultural-tourism integration,” and “sustainable development”: In terms of cultural preservation, it responds to the cultural heritage work guidelines of “prioritizing protection, strengthening management, uncovering value, ensuring effective utilization, and bringing cultural relics to life,” thereby establishing the central role of cultural heritage transmission; At the level of business model innovation, we implement the requirement to “shape tourism through culture and showcase culture through tourism,” developing experiential products such as VR tours and themed cultural and creative markets; at the level of governance mechanisms, we practice the concept of “joint construction, co-governance, and shared benefits,” balancing short-term gains with long-term value through consultative mechanisms. The research framework established in this study—comprising “problem diagnosis, root cause analysis, countermeasure design, and policy benchmarking”—can provide a theoretical reference for historical and cultural scenic areas to resolve the conflict between development and preservation. The multi-stakeholder governance model, intervention experimental methods, and cultural value assessment dimensions proposed herein offer methodological insights for subsequent research in this field.

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Funding

This paper was supported by Chongqing University of Education, Chongqing, China, Science & Technology Project (No. KY20240060).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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